**UNITING PEOPLE THROUGH LANGUAGE AND MIND CULTIVATION:
A BUDDHIST RESPONSE TO THE WORLD SCIENTISTS' WARNING TO HUMANITY**

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I want to congratulate the world scientists for casting their eyes beyond the lab, and issuing the "WARNING TO HUMANITY". Though the statement was issued some three years ago, the issues raised by it, relating to our relationship among ourselves and with mother nature, remain as valid today as it was then.

I come to the developmental scene both as a fieldworker and as an academic. I well remember helping to dig a one-mile canal, some 20 years ago, in a rural village in Sri Lanka as one of Sarvodaya rural development projects [1]. As the project field coordinator, I also had the occasion to oversee the work of a crew of over 1000 people for 7 days. It was the inspiration gained with this experience that I decided to work in the area of development for my doctoral studies. As the title of my thesis, Humanistic Nationism [2], suggests, my interest was not economics or politics, but values. It was the same interest that has made me work in the area of multiculturalism in a Canadian context [3].

Given this background, I have little difficulty with the general thrust and the content of the scientists' statement. But as one who has observed societies, including our own Canadian, tear themselves apart on social issues, what I would like to comment from the Buddhist perspective is on the *approach* advocated by the scientists towards resolving the specific issues identified in the warning.

The Buddha, who lived two thousand five hundred years ago, is of course well-known to the scientists for his teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path from which they have drawn a nickname to characterize the behaviour of hadrons. Lesser known, however, is his fundamental theory relating to causality. Called 'conditioned co-origination' (*paticca samuppada*) [4], it comprises of three components: (a) that everything is conditioned (conditionality), (b) that the conditions are many (multicausality), and finally, (c) that the relationship that holds between any two events, things, etc. is reciprocal and not linear (reciprocal causality).

Even though perhaps not cast in such terms, and all three dimensions not always emphasized at all times, the concept of conditionality is hardly unfamiliar territory to scientists. Works such as by Macy, *Mutual Causality in Buddhism and General Systems Theory* (1991), and Bharucha, *Buddhist Theory of Causation and Einstein's Theory of Relativity* (1992) e.g., establish admirably the correspondences between the Buddha's theory and science. Yet, despite the fact that these causal principles are the very conceptual tools scientists fall back on in their lab research, I was taken by surprise to see little evidence of any consciousness to this fact in the *language* of the warning statement that deals with the real world.

But why is the language of the statement an issue? It was the American linguist Edward Sapir (1949:162) who draws our attention in the twentieth century to a point made by the Indian linguist Bhartrhari several centuries earlier (see Matilal, 1971:29) in the following words:

Human beings ...are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society...the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group....

The claim here, of course, is not that language alone influences thought or that everybody's thought is so influenced all the time. Nor is it that the reverse, that thought has a bearing on language, doesn't hold. But it is that language, on the average, does have a significant bearing on our everyday living [5].

It is not only thought that is conditioned by language, but behaviour, too, when we consider the reciprocal relationship that holds between the mind and the body. the Buddha's term 'mindbody' ('namarupa') for a sentient being keeping us reminded of the relationship [6].

So my critique of the scientists is that by not bringing their scientific outlook to the use of language, it perpetuates, though unintentionally, the divisions that already exist in society.

Let me begin by conceding that the scientists do show their awareness of multiconditionality, one of the dimensions of conditioned co-origination (as above), when they observe that the five areas identified under "What we must do" in the statement are referred to as "inextricably linked". But when it comes to elaborating the points individually, this recognition seems to vanish into thin air, as the scientists begin to talk in the layperson's language of folk wisdom. This is not not to denigrate folk wisdom, but rather to point out how such language may not lead to the solutions intended. This is primarily because such language is often unidirectional, ignoring the reality of reciprocity.

We take, e.g., the first point, "restor[ing] and protect[ing] the integrity of the earth's system we depend on". The wording, no doubt, is an improvement upon an earlier position of anthropomorphism which allowed man, with the blessings of both religion and science, a free hand for robbing nature, pillaging and damaging it, raping and just about killing it. But it is still linear, going only one way - from human to nature, earth in this case. It fails to recognize the reverse process - from earth to human. It doesn't encourage us to recognize, e.g., that the earth, too, can be 'self-centered', if you would pardon a personification. Nature can be cruel, taking a free hand in imposing its own disasters upon us humans - floods, earthquakes, lightning that kills, unseasonal rains, droughts, famines, forest fires, etc.

It is, of course, ridiculous to call upon nature for a 'responsibility' for its behaviour. But what we can recognize is that nature's behaviour is conditioned. A flood in a given land mass is conditioned by the movement of currents within the same land mass which in turn is conditioned by some movement of land elsewhere on earth. Earthquakes, floods, forest fires and so on are likewise conditioned.

So is the behaviour of animals. Hunger, fear, mating needs, scarcity or abundance of resources etc. are the conditions that determine their behaviour, and yes, thought. Is it not the same conditionality that governs our own human behaviour?

To make this point is not to engage in theoretical hairsplitting. It has its pragmatic import. For one thing, to recognize nature's impact upon us is to help us shed any romantic ideas about land, earth, water, animals and other aspects of nature. To carry the one-sided statement to its logical conclusion, that nature must somehow be protected from us mindless omnivores and destroyers, would be to ensure human extinction. How would, e.g., native people of the north survive without killing the caribou, or Newfoundland or other fisherman around the world, without catching fish? How could African farmers survive without ensuring that their crops are saved from roaming elephants? How could the needs of growing cities be met without encroaching upon some farm land?

The point, of course, is not that we approve of unlimited urban growth, poaching, seal hunting or killing animals to meet our unsatiable consumerist demands. What a conditioned co-origination view of reality does allow us is to see nature not as something sacrosanct, to be paid homage to [7] but something to be managed, as the scientists' statement rightly says, "more effectively". So it is not that we must, as the statement calls for, "halt deforestation" or halt "...loss of agricultural land", nor that trees must never be felled, nor that animals must never be killed, but that these be done so as not to upset the interdependency and the conditioned relationship that hold, not only between nature and humans, but among the various other natural phenomena as well.

To remind us of conditionality and interdependency, then, is to stop pointing fingers, and to take away the sense of guilt that a one way 'human to nature' approach imposes upon us, dividing the human

community into villains and heroes. It is to encourage instead in us a general attitude of 'consider the conditions' and 'consider the consequences' outlook instead of 'you shall perish in hell' outlook, one which has pitted group against group, individual against individual. It is the former attitude alone that can unite us humans in a common search to manage the conditions of survival, for both humans and nature, in balance.

The practical difficulties imposed by a unidirectional thinking becomes further evident in relation to points 3 to 5 of 'what we must do' of the statement. Take, e.g., the fifth point which reads, "We must ensure sexual equality, and guarantee women control over their own reproductive decisions". There is, of course, nothing objectionable about the basic idea behind the statement. But, to say that we must guarantee women control over their reproductive decisions is to ask for the impossible. The fact of multiconditionality suggests that no single person or system can have total control over all conditions.

But more disturbingly, it is to impose that very impossible task upon the woman, as if women live in an isolated world, free of conditions - external ones such as men, social structures, religious institutions, values, spiritualities, technology, geography, weather conditions, seasons and the like, and personal ones such as physiology, biology, emotions, values, spirituality, tastes and the like.

It is also to fall back on that dubious notion called free-will'. Classical philosophical wisdom, of course, has it that we humans do have a 'free-will', and that this falls into gear whenever we are faced with a decision. But this is to acknowledge a Cartesian-like binary division, 'me' and 'my free will'. It is as if there is something within us that is somehow outside of us.

Theists will readily call this 'free will' the soul, or the self, the doer of the action, the agent. But, in the view of the Buddha, this a mere delusion. His understanding is that there is nothing within our sentient mindbodies other than *process* the process of atoms and molecules coming together and falling apart, thoughts (which he calls a 'stream of consciousness' (*vinnaṇa sota*) coming to be and passing away, giving way to others, and the like [8]. Simply put, it is this process itself that is in charge of the process! The Buddha captures this notion in the technical term 'anatta', literally 'asoulity' but rendered more commonly as 'selflessness'[9].

What we then have within us is not an intelligent free-will, but if you like, a dumb, and blind, conditionality, in its co-, multi- and reciprocal relationships. Thus, women can NOT have exclusive control over their reproductive decisions any more than men can, or any more than in any other decisions.

The decision to have or not to have a baby, for example, is first of all conditioned by emotions, the availability of a male partner (even allowing for frozen sperms). The same multi- and reciprocal conditionality, of course, holds with not wanting to have a baby. If, e.g., the man doesn't agree to be protective, then there will be a baby. Teenage pregnancy is ample evidence of this.

Conditionality surely holds when it comes to abortion, too, the point I believe is intended by the statement about guaranteeing women control of their reproductive decisions. Among the conditions that bear upon the decision to not go through childbearing are the fathering man, one's immediate family, close friends and colleagues; technology, the doctor and the medical facilities; social norms, mores and values, varying as they do in

relation to geography and period of human history; one's personal values, spiritual or other, and so on. To keep ourselves reminded of such a conditioned co-origination reality is to ensure that those others are not absolved of the responsibility, leaving the woman to do all the emotional work.

Additionally, it would be to ensure that in the name of a Right, a woman gets no more licence to abuse another life, namely the unborn one, than a man killing another man/woman/child. This would be specially germane in light of the Buddhist view of rebirth [10] (and the Hindu view of incarnation [11]), that the aborted sentient being will be born again. Would the very act of abortion leave emotional scars and/or physical deformities in a next life, of the aborted? How about the aborter herself? Would the

memory ingrained in her stream of consciousness flow into the next life, and how? Keep her in continuing agony, render her schizophrenic, give her a handicapped body...?

The scientists' unilinear wording about poverty raises similar kinds of problems. "We must reduce and eventually eliminate poverty", goes the statement. To begin with, there will never be a time or context when there will be no poverty. Poverty, like the air we breathe, is something that we can never get rid of! At all times, in every society, there will be those who have and those who don't, those who benefit from a passed down inheritance or a handed down paucity, those who can find work and those who can't, those who can keep a job and those who can't, those who are vibrant and active and those that are lazy and indolent. etc. It may be comforting to think that capitalism alone creates poverty, but of course, socialism, in its various forms, creates it, too.

So clearly, the language of the scientists asks for the theoretically and pragmatically impossible, creating unnecessary social and psychological trauma.

Equally seriously, as worded, the responsibility of eliminating poverty seems to be placed in the hands of everybody else other than the poor themselves, as if they have nothing to do with it! Does poverty have anything to do with personal qualities of frugality and the good management of, scarce as they are, personal resources? Isn't the problem as much in working industriously, towards avoiding and minimizing conditions that would bring about poverty? To ask such questions would be to add a missing primary condition to the poverty formula - the role of the impoverished individual in dealing with the issue effectively.

From these two examples - guaranteeing women control and eliminating poverty, we see how a lack of the recognition of co-, multi- and reciprocal- conditionality of issues may stand in the way of arriving at workable solutions as expected by scientists.

Critiquing theoretically, however, is not the only contribution Buddhism can make to the scientists' statement. Scientists well know that the quality of the mind is a key condition for the quality of scientific work. The same is surely true in matters of daily living. When afflicted by any condition - happiness or misery, good health or ill health, wealth or poverty, e.g., different individuals respond differently. What then determines the difference? I would claim that it is the quality of life of the person. If that be the case, then one of the conditions in dealing with the issues raised by the statement has to be the cultivation of the quality of our mind.

Meditation may be the path that the Buddha discovered as leading to liberation. But it can also be the path for our everyday living, and for dealing with societal and personal issues of the sort identified in the statement.

In this practice, the practitioner is called upon to be aware of the moment, each moment. The first phase of the practice is to calm the mind (*śamatha*), in itself helpful in improving one's quality of mind. However, this is only the preparatory step to the higher goal of cultivating it to allow for that clear vision of reality to appear on the mind's screen (*vipassana*), cutting through the layers of ignorance. Pragmatically speaking, this is to we can look within ourselves, honestly, and recognize whatever conditions we may be inputting in creating the problem and any possible contributions we may have towards the solution.

So we offer mindfulness meditation (*satipatthana*) [12], awareness of the moment, as a supportive if not a necessary condition in dealing with the issues raised by the scientists.

In conclusion, then, as worded now, the Statement perpetuates the wars between pro-life and pro-choice, pro- and anti- environment (meaning business), poor and rich, first world and two-thirds world, and the like. So we call upon the scientists to *re-issue* the statement, re-working the language in a way that does two things:

- a. at the theoretical level, to keep us sensitized to the fact of reciprocity, multiconditionality and co- conditionality of reality, in specific relation to the issues raised in the statement, and
- b. at the practical level, to thereby help bring us together to work cooperatively and compassionately, to solve the common tasks we face.

But in this, it is imperative that we fail not to recognize another condition. That is that since 'we' here include scientists themselves, it also becomes incumbent upon them not merely to 'warn humanity' and retreat to the comfort of their labs, but to retreat to a quiet corner so that they can cultivate their own spiritual minds, in order to work on the quality of that dimension of their being. Already well-trained in uncovering the secrets of nature, the challenge here is to uncover the unplumbed depths of their own spirituality, the 'genetic potential ...for psychophysical/biochemical harmony' as I have characterized elsewhere (Sugunasiri, 1993), and cultivate them rigorously.

If religionists can help in this effort, then it would be a way of reciprocating for the initiative taken in issuing the 'warning to humanity'. Such a commitment on the part of scientists, with or without the guiding hand of religionists, will also take away any appearances of arrogance on the part of scientists in 'warning humanity' as on from high, as if they themselves are not part of that humanity and as if science itself has not contributed to the matters that humanity is called upon to resolve.

But most significantly, the emergence of a *critical mass* of 'spiritual scientists', both objective and compassionate, might well be the condition for ushering in that world of justice, peace and harmony envisaged in the scientists' statement. This can happen when as co-spiritualists now, there evolves a cooperation between scientists and religionists as co-equals, and the average folk in society, following their lead.

Through all this, finally, scientists will also have helped establish in the minds of humanity the pivotal role played by both science and spirituality in resolving conflicts and improving the quality of life.

ENDNOTES

1. See Macy, 1983, for a study of the movement.
2. See Sugunasiri, 1978, for the fuller title.
3. See Sugunasiri, in progress.
4. In Pali, the language closest to Buddha's and in which the earliest scriptures, T(r)ipitaka, were committed to writing.
5. See Sugunasiri, 1978:chapter 6 for an extensive treatment.
6. See Sugunasiri, 1995, for a fuller exposition of the Buddha's view.
7. It is not that it has no place, as our Native people keep us well conscientized, but it is that we should avoid reification.
8. It is to capture this unity that the Buddha has so painstakingly characterized the reality of sentiency in terms of a 'psychophysique' ('namarupa') (see Sugunasiri, 1990 for an elaboration).
9. See chapter 6, 'Selfless Minds' in Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1993:105-130 for a cognitive science analysis of the concept.
10. See Stevenson, 1975, for some contemporary social scientific research evidence, through case studies, for the possibility of rebirth.
11. I use the term 'incarnation' in relation to Hinduism, because it involves a Godhead. Rebirth, on the other hand, is an auto process, no different from a thought process traveling along a neuronal path

(this life), reaching the tendril's end-point (death), crossing the synapse (interlife) and re-establishing itself (being born again).

12. See Thera (1962) for a detailed treatment. For those interested in the practice, tapes are available in any record store.

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